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1965/03/24

WITCHAM, NEWFIELD

United States Senate
Office of the Majority Leader
Washington, D.C.

12c

March 24, 1965

The President
The White House
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. President:

Over the years, I have submitted both to your predecessor and to you a series of memorandums on the situation in Viet Nam and Southeast Asia. Sometimes suggestions have been requested of me and sometimes they have been volunteered. In either case, they have been motivated solely by a desire to give such help as I might in the burdens of the decisions of the Presidency.

The main lines of thought in these memorandums over the years, as you may recall, are the following:

1. That the United States does not have interests in the Southeast Asian mainland to justify the costs in American lives and resources which would be required if we were to attempt to exercise, in effect, primacy over what transpires in that region; and that, insofar as South Viet Nam is concerned, we are there, not to take primary responsibility, but to provide whatever assistance is wanted and can be used effectively by the Vietnamese themselves.
2. That our national interest lies in reducing, rather than in increasing, the unilateral role which we have played in recent years, through the foreign aid program and excessive involvement of various United States agencies in the internal affairs of the weak nations of that region.
3. That our national security interests are best served in Southeast Asia by severely limiting our military involvement and, confining ourselves at most, to a very judicious use of air and sea power.
4. That the best prospects for a tolerable long-range situation in Southeast Asia lie in encouraging, through astute diplomacy and limited and preferably multilateral economic assistance, the emergence of truly independent governments with firm roots in their own people, which are as free as possible from great power involvement in their internal affairs. This situation, as I have noted, time and again, has prevailed in Southeast Asia at least until very recently when, in my judgment, a combination of years of open diplomacy and the events in Viet Nam finally conspired to push this small and shy-led nation sharply towards China. It has prevailed

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to some extent in Burma and at one time, there was hope for it in South Viet Nam under the late Ngo Dinh Diem.

[I am aware that the principles of policy outlined in the four points above are subject to the charge of "a return to isolationism." It should be noted, however, that there is no automatic virtue in an ubiquitous and indiscriminate internationalism, particularly when it leads to the kind of isolated internationalism in which we presently find ourselves in Viet Nam.]

I think it is correct to say that the trend of our policies over the past few years has been in a direction opposite to the main lines of thought which are contained in my memorandums over the past few years. I say this, as you know, without rancor or criticism. I know that my thoughts have received your careful attention. I know that your assistants and the bureaucracy have studied them and occasionally even have concurred in an idea expressed in them.

Nevertheless, it is still a fact that present policy is on a course which contains the following diametric opposites of the suggestions which I have advanced over the years. [Present policy, so far as I can determine, requires:]

✓ 4 [(1) That we make whatever expenditure of American lives and resources, on an ascending scale, is necessary in order for us to exercise, in effect, a primacy over what transpires in South Viet Nam.] If this involves going into North Viet Nam and beyond, that, too, will be done.

✓ 5 [(2) That in the absence of unconditional capitulation of the Viet Cong, our military involvement, must continue and be increased as necessary] (there is discussion even now of a Joint Command which can only be the prelude to United States command in fact if not in word).

(3) That our military involvement will not be restricted to a most judicious use of air and sea power, as evidenced by instructions to strike at "targets of convenience"; but rather that it be extended, even to the infusion of a steadily increasing number of American combat forces on the ground.

(4) That we will not try to encourage, through sustained diplomatic efforts, the emergence of the kind of situations which exist in Burma and Cambodia, but rather, so far as I can see, that we will stress those situations which can be maintained only by continuous infusions of American aid (i.e., Laos and Thailand, not to speak of South Viet Nam itself).

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Those are the facts of our policy as it is being carried out, as I see it. It is possible that this direction may not be precisely the one you seek, a possibility suggested by your calling to my attention this morning your unawareness in advance of the usage of gas in Viet Nam. It may be that you were also unaware in advance, understandably, of the usage of napalm and of the concept of "targets of convenience" which are likely to do at least as much damage to non-combatants as combatants in a situation such as Viet Nam or the countless other decisions which deepen our involvement and responsibility. May I say in connection with the gas that it is beyond my comprehension how any American in an office of responsibility would not realize the vast significance, beyond immediate military considerations, of this act and, therefore, seek the highest political authority before taking such a step.

It is this possibility, that actions of the bureaucracy may have taken us in more deeply than desired which leads me to write you once again, and most respectfully suggest certain changes at this time which may move us from the present direction of policy as it is expressed in action. In all frankness, I believe that the present direction is at variance with the extent and nature of our national interests on the Southeast Asian mainland and in the world. In the end, I fear that this course, at best, will win us only more widespread difficulties which will play havoc with the domestic program of the Administration, with the balance of payments situation, and with our interests and constructive influence elsewhere in the world.

I have no great hope that, at this late date, these suggestions will be useful to you. But for what they may be worth, I would suggest:

1. That we should concentrate any ground forces which are sent to Viet Nam to safeguard Americans already there in two or three key points which either back up on the sea or are easily accessible from the sea (i.e., Saigon and Da Nang) and that all other Americans in Viet Nam should be drawn into these protected points as rapidly as possible. From the point of view of our diplomatic position, two or three accessible and more defensible bases will be of greater value than numerous installations in the interior which can become, one by one, the targets of massed Viet Cong attacks;

2. That we should seek, indirectly but forcefully, through all possible sources, a reconvening of the 1961 Geneva Conference group;

3. That we should insist upon, as the sole precondition for such a meeting, a total cease-fire and stand-fast throughout all of Viet Nam, north and south.

4. That we should be prepared for consultations between the Saigon government, the North Vietnamese and the opposition in the south on the conditions for maintaining the "cease-fire" and "stand-fast," and on subsequent relationships once a conference has been convened and, further, that we accept, if circumstances indicate the desirability of it, United Nations participation in this connection.

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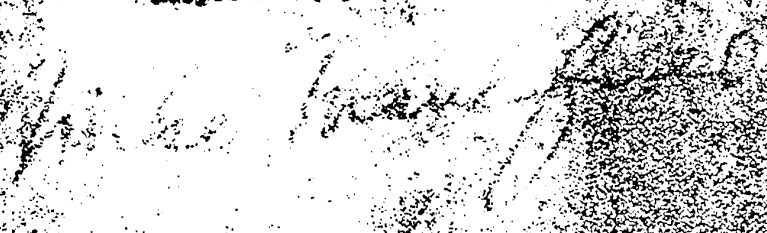
The President

[As you well know, it is very difficult to predict the evolution of a course of policy once it has been set in motion.] There will be risks to our national interests in a conference, but certainly, in my opinion, risks which are far smaller than those which we now run. I think it should be pointed out that if there is a settlement it is possible that Chinese influence in Southeast Asia may increase, but that possibility is even greater if the present course is pursued further. A settlement would not necessarily mean, however, that China will automatically control the area in a military or even an economic sense. The historic counterforce to that domination is the general Southeast Asian fear and anxiety of the Chinese which is quite distinct and may be at least as strong as ideology. In present circumstances, this fear and anxiety would appear to be largely dormant, but it could revive in the event of a Chinese attempt at subversion or aggression, particularly after a settlement. The existing Sino-Soviet dispute is also likely to distract China from Southeast Asia to some degree, but not in the event of a deepening military confrontation in that area.

[I have written frankly and at length out of a deep concern over the present trend of events in Viet Nam. We are in very deep already and in most unfavorable circumstances.] In my judgment we were in too deep long before you assumed office. But you know the whole situation on a day-to-day basis and I most certainly respect the decisions which you have felt compelled to make in this connection.

I shall not trouble you further with memorandums on this situation and I do not expect an answer to this letter. Your responsibilities are great and, to what I have written, I know you must add the views of many others who see this situation in different terms. But I did want to put certain possibilities before you in the event you have not yet had an opportunity to explore them. And I want you to know that you have my support as a personal as well as an official basis. If there is anything I can do to help you in this as in any other matter you have only to ask and I will try to the best of my ability to do so.

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TRANSCRIPTION FOLLOWS

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Respectfully yours,

Mike Mansfield